



2013 State  
Superintendent  
OF THE Year  
Forum

Leadership  
FOR *Current challenges and future  
opportunities facing public education*  
Change

**AASA**  
THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION

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## ABOUT AASA



AASA, The School Superintendents Association, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA's mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children. For more information, visit [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org). Follow AASA on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/AASAHQ](http://www.twitter.com/AASAHQ) or on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/AASApge](http://www.facebook.com/AASApge). Information about AASA Children's Programs is available on Twitter @AASATotalChild.

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## ABOUT ARAMARK EDUCATION



To help support the K-12 educational mission, Aramark Education provides a complete range of food, facility, uniform and other support services to more than 500 school districts in the United States. Aramark Education offers public and private education institutions a family of dining and facility services, including on-site and off-site breakfast and lunch meal programs; after-school and summer meals; catering; nutrition education; retail design and operations; and maintenance, custodial, grounds, energy management, construction management and building commissioning. For more information about Aramark's K-12 food and facility services programs, please visit [www.aramarkschools.com](http://www.aramarkschools.com).

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## ABOUT VALIC



For more than half a century, VALIC has served as a leading retirement plan provider for K-12 schools and school districts, as well as for higher education, healthcare, government and other not-for-profit institutions. As of August 30, 2013, VALIC has more than \$79 billion in total assets under management and manages plans for nearly 25,000 groups serving nearly 2 million plan participants. VALIC represents The Variable Annuity Life Insurance Company and its subsidiaries, VALIC Financial Advisors, Inc. and VALIC Retirement Services Company. For more information about VALIC, please visit [www.VALIC.com](http://www.VALIC.com).

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## INTRODUCTION

**A**SA, The School Superintendents Association, invited 2013 state superintendents of the year to gather in Washington, D.C., in November for two days of dialogue about the transformational shift in public schools involving Common Core State Standards, new assessments and technology in the classroom. The nation's top school district leaders talked openly about the challenges and opportunities they face and their critical leadership roles to ensure success. This publication highlights major themes from the forum, strategies for success and what's on the horizon for public education.

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# Common Core State Standards: What's next?

School districts in 45 states are implementing Common Core standards. Superintendents are focused on leveraging limited resources for increased professional staff development, better-aligned curriculum and new assessments. This work unfolds in a highly political environment as critics continue to raise concerns about local control and the rigor of the standards.

A panel of experts, moderated by *Education Week* reporter Michele McNeil, shared perspectives about the opportunities, challenges and politics associated with Common Core standards. Center on Education Policy (CEP) Executive Director Maria Ferguson opened the conversation by highlighting major takeaways from a recent study that presents feedback from state-level leaders in 40 states implementing Common Core.

Major highlights from the CEP study follow:

- Almost all of the states did not believe they would change direction on Common Core: “The train has left the station and there’s no turning back.”
- Almost all believe the new standards are more rigorous than what’s in place now and could improve educational outcomes for students.
- State-level leaders believe that the testing consortia would do a better job than assessments currently in place. Many states are enthusiastic about the new assessments. States are beginning to assess mastery of the Common Core and adapt current tests.
- To prepare for the Common Core, states are focusing on outreach and communications with districts and post-secondary institutions. Communications issues include clearly explaining what the standards

are — and are not — as well as managing both positive and negative news coverage. States also are working closely with higher education institutions to ensure Common Core standards validate the skills and knowledge students must acquire to be college-ready.

- Determining how to best provide high-quality professional development is critical — especially at a time when educator evaluations also are being implemented.
- States also are considering how best to leverage limited resources to implement Common Core standards with fidelity.

Ensuring a smooth transition for students with disabilities is a challenge.

Based in Washington, D.C., CEP focuses on actionable research for practitioners and policymakers, but does not advocate or take a position on education issues. The 2013 CEP survey marks the third time since 2010 that the organization has surveyed states about Common Core standards.

Survey results are segmented into several topic areas, including career readiness assessments, transitioning to new standards and assessments for students with disabilities, post-secondary involvement and professional development for teachers and principals. Currently CEP is conducting a district-level survey to look at how the feedback from individual K-12 districts compares to state-level feedback and national issues.

## **Superintendents as sense-makers**

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Superintendents play a critical communications role in helping staff, parents and the community understand the new standards and what they mean for students. They also play an important role in debunking misperceptions. “There is a pervasive feeling that Common Core is a national curriculum or that the U.S. Department of Education is trying to foist Common Core on people,” Ferguson said.

Panelist Cheryl Oldham, vice president of education policy at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, agreed, noting that the Race to the Top’s incentivizing of Common Core didn’t help discredit this misperception. “We never get to the conversation about what’s important for students because it’s all about process,” she said. “We’re talking about facts and myths, and a lot of it is not about substance.”

The politics surrounding Common Core standards is expected to only grow next year as 38 states hold gubernatorial elections. Candidates must assess how much they want to battle with state legislatures over the new standards and assessments. “When you talk about those states, we have to keep in mind states that will hold elections for state superintendents as well,” said Nevada Superintendent of the Year Caroline McIntosh.

Business leaders with the U.S. Chamber support Common Core standards and new assessments because they build on efforts to ensure students are career- and college-ready when they graduate from high school. “We need graduates beyond high school... We’re looking at more sustainable policy changes,” Oldham said.

With this in mind, Washington Superintendent of the Year Sandra Lynne Hill urged the Chamber to work as sense-makers in the communities alongside superintendents. “When our test scores drop, will the businesses come out and help to explain the drop to our communities?” she asked.

## New challenges for school districts

The combination of new standards, new assessments and educator evaluations — with no new dollars to support implementation — is creating even greater challenges for school districts.



**“We had superintendents that we knew were not ready for this. Our teachers didn’t have the updated curriculum. I support Common Core, but implementation in North Carolina is one big mess.”**

*—2013 AASA National Superintendent of the Year Mark Edwards*

North Carolina is one of a few states that have rolled out new assessments aligned to Common Core standards. “We saw a 40- to 50-point drop, and the gaps for minority and low-income students were huge,” said 2013 AASA National Superintendent of the Year Mark Edwards. “We had superintendents that we knew were not ready for this. Our teachers didn’t have the updated curriculum. I support Common Core, but implementation in North Carolina is one big mess.”

Washington’s Sandra Lynne Hill leads a high-poverty school district, which, she said, further adds to the list of challenges confronting educators. “As the test scores drop, accountability is a big issue,” she said. “We’re going to punish our teachers, and that doesn’t get us anywhere. I’m having trouble getting the best teachers to go to the highest needs schools as it is.”

The superintendents’ concerns are shared by many, noted Ferguson. “The tests are more like what China, Finland and other high-achieving countries are doing now.” The key difference, added Ferguson, is that unlike China and Finland, the United States has high stakes accountability systems in place and few resources to implement major education reforms.

Ferguson added that there is no universal agreement on how best to evaluate teachers, but more successful efforts involve the individual who is being evaluated.

## About the Common Core State Standards

In the past, each state has had its own process for developing standards, leading to a patchwork of different expectations of student achievements and making it more difficult to evaluate and compare student achievement consistently across the country.

Common Core State Standards place greater emphasis on literacy, critical thinking skills and depth of learning, and have been benchmarked against the best standards in the United States and in high-achieving countries. The goal is to give students the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in a competitive global economy.

States that adopt the Common Core standards will have the same math and English language arts standards in grades K-12, making it easier for those states to pool information and resources to develop tests that better evaluate student progress.

More also must be done to ensure teachers are part of the Common Core standards dialogue and have the resources to be successful in the classroom. “If you don’t have teachers on board, good luck,” Ferguson said.

# Digital conversion: A model for student achievement

**W**hen Mark Edwards was selected in 2007 as the new superintendent of the Mooresville Graded School District in North Carolina, student performance was below the statewide average on tests and the high school graduation rate was only 64 percent. In this school district of 6,000 students, 40 percent of students are on free and reduced-price lunch, although closer to 65 percent qualify.

In response to low student achievement, Edwards launched a “digital conversion” of schools in the district that reinvented the way instruction was delivered to students. The model provides real-world experience that makes learning relevant for students. It also has helped close the digital divide among students of poverty.

Edwards said Mooresville will soon be the first district in the nation to connect every student at home and at school from third through twelfth grades. “We think that’s tremendous —about 35 percent of our students didn’t have a connection.”

The far-reaching impact of digital conversion touches all aspects of the district’s work, including professional development, culture, teaching methods and relationships.

## **What is digital conversion?**

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Digital conversion refers to the transformation of instruction from a paper-based world to a primarily digital world, according to Edwards. Every student and every teacher has access to the Internet and a computer. “We want our

students to be ready for their futures not their pasts,” he said. “All students in grades 4-12 have Mac laptops 24/7. All teachers have a MacBook Air. We have interactive whiteboards and ubiquitous wireless. Students have this innate understanding of how to use technology. Our students are learning to problem-solve, investigate and push their interests to new levels.”

For Edwards, digital conversion is about rethinking school from the ground up, using technology and the demands of the 21st century workplace as “a guide.” He noted in his book *Every Day, Every Child: A Digital Conversion Model for Student Achievement* that classrooms still “feature colorful maps and posters, books, globes and other traditional learning aids.” He added that hands-on learning has not changed, but it has been “enhanced by interactive software and dynamic online content.”

Edwards said students move around a lot in classrooms, underscoring research that shows the benefits of physical activity every 12 minutes for sharper focus and better information retention. Teachers are more physically active, too. “I seldom see a teacher sitting down,” he said. “They are roaming conductors — they might ask the trombones to pick it up a little bit or work one-on-one with a clarinetist.” Teachers make a point to interact and connect one-on-one with students throughout the day.

Teachers and administrators also have student data in real time; and so do parents. In this data-rich environment, parents can check grades and homework daily. There’s no lag time in waiting for scores, or risk of receiving them when it may prove too late to make a course correction. “Our teachers have a huge advantage because they have precision about intervention strategies,” Edwards said. “When my son misses a math problem, he gets immediate feedback. As we become more and more adept at using technology, the better we get.”

An increase in targeted professional development also was critical to success. The district has 10 early release days that allow staff to focus on professional development. It also hosts a summer institute. “We paid \$100 a day per teacher or up to \$300. It was the closest thing teachers have had to a raise in a long time.” More than 90 percent of teachers attended the institute.

Edwards said the cost of the district’s digital conversion is \$1.50 per student per day — or the price of a soda. This cost includes hardware, software and online resources. “We’re one of the lowest-funded districts in the state, but we are able to afford it. We stopped buying textbooks.”

Wireless is readily accessible and has been installed at churches, ball fields and other locations throughout the community. Teaching doesn’t end either when the school bell rings at 3 p.m. “Our teachers host discussion boards with kids at night.”

## Creating a new culture of caring

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Key to success was creating a culture that genuinely involved everyone in the digital transformation of classrooms and schools, including students, classified staff, teachers and central office staff. District leaders worked creatively to build capacity among staff. They embraced the shared notion that all staff members are constantly learning and lifting together.

For some, the transformation has required what Edwards refers to as “emotional courage.” The superintendent recalled a conversation with a teacher who told him, “I was scared at first. I was a good teacher. Now, I’ve become a far better teacher and I’m on fire.”

Staff districtwide have worked hard to create a sense of pride in their work. Edwards said this stems in part from the district’s “love and work ethic.” “We talk about the love and work ethic at every single principals’ meeting,” he said. “We know that in the absence of love, students resist discipline and they don’t work as hard.”

## Building public support

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**“We have to stand up and stand strong for every child.”**

—Mark Edwards,  
Superintendent, Mooresville  
Graded School District

Before moving forward with the large-scale initiative, the superintendent engaged both the school board and the community in in-depth conversations. Discussions across the district with parents, community members and business leaders centered on what the community wanted most for its students. The answer largely focused on improved students outcomes.

Edwards asked community members if they thought the district could compete with nearby, high-achieving Chapel Hill, which ranked number one in student achievement according to statewide test scores. “Many people said, ‘No, I don’t think so – they spend \$2,000 to \$3,000 more per student.’” While support grew for the district’s proposed digital conversion, community members understood the district had limited resources.

## Getting results

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Mooresville students now compete head-on, not only with students in nearby high-performing districts but with students in high-achieving countries like Finland and Singapore. They consistently score above the state average on statewide assessments. In 2013, Mooresville boasted the second highest high school graduation rate (93.4 percent), surpassing Chapel-Hill.

## **Mooreville Graded School District book list**

- *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform*, by Michael Fullan
- *Outliers: The Story of Success*, by Malcolm Gladwell
- *Brain Rules*, by John Medina
- *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, by Daniel Pink
- *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change*, by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown
- *Next in line: David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*, by Malcolm Gladwell.

Edwards said student scholarships have increased by 300 percent, totaling almost \$3 million last year. Attendance has increased to 97 percent, and suspensions have dropped by 64 percent. Mooreville's success has attracted national and international attention and has been featured in The New York Times and other publications.

For Edwards, there's more work to do and his focus remains squarely on supporting his students and staff. "We have to stand up and stand strong for every child," he said. "The children who need us the most may give us the most reason not to stand up. When we do stand up, we create those conditions, great things can happen. I'm in awe of our teachers."

# Ensuring superintendents have the tools for new technology

**T**echnology is transforming today's classrooms by providing more and more children with personalized instruction that best fits their learning needs. AASA is teaming up with the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN) to ensure superintendents have the resources they need to successfully implement these changes. CoSN, a national organization based in Washington, D.C., represents individuals in school districts who specialize in technology.

**“Technology doesn't drive itself. You need someone in charge to help work with your leadership team.”**

—Keith Krueger, Chief Executive Officers, CoSN

According to CoSN Chief Executive Officer Keith Krueger, new technology is too often layered on top of what districts are already doing, without allowing time to understand how best to use technology in transformative ways. “What we need to focus on is capacity and leadership,” Krueger urged. “Technology doesn't drive itself. You need someone in charge to help work with your leadership team.”

This work begins by focusing on these key areas:

- *Superintendents* must understand their roles in making the digital leap.
- *Instruction* needs new models and a more student-centered approach.
- *Students and teachers* need more immediate feedback and must be continuous learners.

- *Technology leaders* must understand the educational environment, manage technology and provide vision and leadership.

The sense of urgency is great. Only 51 percent of districts report employing a full-time education technology leader, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Nearly 20 percent of large districts do not have full-time positions. The gap in technology leadership between wealthy and high-poverty districts is great as well.

Krueger urged superintendents to view technology as a strategic asset in their districts, which includes placing an education technology leader on the leadership team or at the cabinet level. “Every district has a chief financial officer. We need to think about technology in the same way,” he said. “We’re at a tipping point.” He added that too often districts focus on hiring an IT person based on the individual’s technical skills rather than leadership skills.

In response, CoSN has developed a framework to help superintendents identify the most essential skills for today’s new chief technology officer (CTO). The framework:

- Examines the expanded role of a CTO as an education leader — not just a technology leader.
- Defines best practices.
- Identifies skills and knowledge that CTOs need to acquire or strengthen.
- Provides a basis for CTO certification.

More details are available at [www.cosn.org/value-cetl-superintendents](http://www.cosn.org/value-cetl-superintendents).

Another challenge for schools, Krueger said, is poor infrastructure for digital learning. “E-rate has done a good job of getting everyone connected, but they are not fast connections,” he said. An E-rate and broadband study conducted this year by CoSN shows that 43 percent of school districts said none of their schools can meet the State Educational Technology Directors Association’s goal of 100 Mbps of Internet access per 1,000 students. Only one-quarter of districts report that 100 percent of their schools meet the goal

As districts make the digital leap, CoSN recommends moving from a vision to scalable action; rethinking governance and staffing; and helping districts make the case for this role of new technology leader. This work is critical to ensure sustainable, long-term change that results in the best outcomes for students.

# Five lessons on leadership

**U**.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary of Elementary and Secondary Education Deb Delisle is well aware of what it takes to lead in today's educational environment. Delisle is a former school district superintendent and was chief of Ohio's top school before moving to Washington. She began her career as an elementary school teacher in the 1970s. At the 2013 Superintendent of the Year Forum, Delisle shared her top five lessons in leadership. Excerpts from her presentation follow in her own words.

## **1** Leadership matters.

“Leadership matters and it matters a whole lot. I haven't been in one high-performing school where there isn't a principal who wows me and who knows the kids. Same for superintendents. I can tell pretty quickly if that superintendent has been in the building. Leadership is about asking the right questions. Take teacher evaluations, for example. What are students doing in response to teachers? What are the teachers doing in relation to principals? How do you measure the growth and impact on student achievement and other areas with the principal?

“It's about a shared vision. Ask yourself, What do I stand for? If you were going to put a placard on your desk, what are your non-negotiables? For example, one of my non-negotiables is please don't ever talk about 'those kids' in my presence.

“Behind every piece of data you analyze there's a heart and soul of a child who wants to learn. I see a lot of data walls in schools. If the staff can't tell me about student #3247, I cringe. That child may have a parent who is incarcerated. His mother may be dying from cancer. Every child is worthy of your attention. Unless you are willing to walk up to a kid and say, I don't have the energy to support you anymore, make sure that data really matters.”

## 2

### **Prepare kids for their futures, not our present.**

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“One of our biggest issues is how do we harness the technology kids are using for learning? We had a one-to-one laptop initiative for our kids in my school district. Behavioral problems went down because kids were engaged. I would walk into the school at 7 a.m. and students were teaching each other. They asked one another, ‘How did you do that? What did you do?’

“We also had to be more creative about professional development. We made sure that every teacher brought a student with them when we did PD. We didn’t let people’s lack of knowledge about technology slow us down. We worked through it.

“We also have to work with our community to help them understand that our kids are operating in an interdependent world. Kids have to learn how to cross cultures and time zones, and we have to help them. In one school, kids were taking water samples and matching them up against samples taken by students in another country. Was that easy to arrange? No, but it was important.

“We have to help kids learn how to learn. Otherwise they will not be prepared for jobs of the future. There’s a lot of brain research that shows kids tackle answers first and then do trial and error. In the past, it was much more sequential and linear.”

## 3

### **Build a strong school and classroom culture.**

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“If you don’t have a strong culture, forget about reforms. It’s about understanding whether you want your own child in this school. It’s the important job we have that makes us figure out who in that school is not making the culture so great. Everyone needs to be responsible for taking care of the kids. It’s about engagement with families. Sending home two newsletters a month is not engagement — that’s communications.

“What are the policies and procedures in your district that truly engage families? I went to a school that boasted about its family engagement work. The principal told me the school had a special room for parents to check out books on parenting and other resources. Yet the sign on the door said ‘Hours 3-4 p.m.’”

## 4

### **Lead with next practices, not best practices.**

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“There is no silver bullet out there — what works in one district may not work in another.

“All of our interventions were in elementary schools and middle schools. We had to shift and ask, What do we do with high school students? Always think about next practices: What do I want to do next? What may help us think differently about this?”

## **5 Rethink the concept of the achievement gap.**

“When we talk about achievement gap, the ownership goes back to kids: You know, if this group of kids wasn’t in my class, I would have better growth scores. Instead, think of the opportunity gap and the expectations gap. Do all of our students have opportunities to participate in rigorous class work?”

“For the expectations gap, there are people who think there are kids in this class who aren’t going to get it — that has to be one of your non-negotiables. It’s about all kids not just three-quarters of the class. Think about what policies exist in your schools that actually say to kids, We’re here to support you, and when you mess up, we have a net to catch you. Here’s how we’re going to get you back on track.

“We must also look at the statistics about who gets the best teachers. I’m concerned schools serving African-American students are more than twice as likely to be taught by teachers teaching out of field. The students don’t have advocates to stand up and say, This is wrong. Students from the highest poverty schools were 10 times less likely to have a high-performing teacher. And 80 percent of African-American students are less likely to have access to Advanced Placement courses. If we know that, why aren’t we doing something about it?”

“It’s up to us to say, Not on my watch. As long as I’m here this is how we’re going to have principal meetings, this is my outreach to teachers, etc.

“Kids don’t care if we’re Democrats or Republicans. They just want us to make the best decisions for them.”

# On the Hill: Congressional insights on education policy



ASA Associate Executive Director of Policy and Advocacy Noelle Ellerson represents the interests and concerns of the nation's superintendents on Capitol Hill. Ellerson offered a look at what's on the horizon for K-12 education in the new year.

## **“Big issues” to look for in 2014 on a national educational level**

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“One of the key areas to look for is the difference between how much the administration remains committed to its first-year promises and balancing those priorities with the gridlock in Congress. Next year is an election year. How much is Congress actually going to want to get done and how much can members get done?”

“It's a lot of status quo. We hobble along through each appropriations and debt ceiling debate. We would like to have a discussion about full funding for [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] — but that's a non-starter in this environment.”

“We also need to look at [the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)] and waivers. ESEA politics are very different in an election year. What I would like to see is a White House that supports ESEA policy that is available to all 50 states, not just those who are willing to play along with the administration's conditions and waivers. The problem is the administration continues to rely on waivers and those waivers expire. When they expire, all

states and districts are left with is a broken law that is still in place. What's more, this is a lame duck administration. They don't have the pressure of an election to offer some meaningful relief to all 50 states.

"States can only get relief if they implement the administration's policy such as differentiated accountability, new standards and teacher evaluations. Those are all things we can get behind. Their policy isn't off base, though the conditional nature of its availability leaves much to be desired.

## Increased efforts to more fully fund E-rate

"E-rate and education technology are other big topics. E-rate comes from a user fee collected from our phone bills and comes through the [Federal Communications Commission (FCC)]. It helps schools and libraries afford their Internet connections. It's in 97 percent of the nation's schools. It was created with a goal of expanded connectivity in schools and libraries. It has been hugely successful.

**“What I would like to see is a White House that supports ESEA policy that is available to all 50 states, not just those who are willing to play along with the administration's conditions and waivers.”**

—Noelle Ellerson, Associate Executive Director of Policy and Advocacy, AASA

"But when the 1996 bill was written, no one could anticipate how the Internet would change the learning landscape, and so there has been a call for modernization in E-rate that includes streamlining the application and taking a closer look at how schools are connected. For example, should the program still support more outdated technology like fax lines? E-rate is funded at \$2.3 billion and adjusted for inflation. The demand is more than double the available resources.

"The president's proposal is ConnectED — and it's more than just E-rate. AASA is focused on his point about having 99 percent of students having access to broadband in five years. We support this goal. The president's plan also talks about how schools are connected.

"The FCC also is looking at how we streamline the E-rate process. Can we create a shorter renewal form? For example, can districts fill out applications online or apply as consortiums?

"The big issue is funding E-rate. AASA wants it funded at \$5 billion — that's still under the amount needed, but it would be a bold step to modernize E-rate to incentivize all schools toward broadband connectivity, and it would help us meet the president's vision. If we don't better fund E-rate, the program will die because it's so drastically underfunded. \$5 billion would be an additional 40 cents per phone bill a month. People will say that's a tax

but it's not — it's a user fee. That's a postage stamp a month. That's less than a foot-long Subway sub a year.

“All these changes happen in the FCC. This would be a huge win for schools and libraries.”

## **Addressing sequestration**

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“Congress must act to fully restore the remaining sequester cuts.” If we don't get fiscal year 2014 right, it means the sequester cuts are locked in next year as well. It will become even harder to get the funding for FY 2015. And it will be even longer before the nation gets back to pre-Recession levels.”

## **Career and Technical Education Act: Is Perkins in trouble?**

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“The Career and Technical Education [Act] is another big issue this year. Congress has expressed interest in reauthorizing Perkins. The president recently announced his proposed career tech program: a new \$100 million initiative called Youth CareerConnect. It is a competitive program that would fund select high schools and prepare students to be career-tech-ready. Perkins, however, is \$1 billion for all schools — not just those that compete. Will the administration undermine Perkins as well?”

## **Superintendents' voices must be heard**

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“The most compelling advocate is one who is honest and straightforward. The most effective are superintendents who tell their own story and how federal policy is helping or not helping prepare students. They don't sugarcoat or downplay issues. They also show members of Congress what impact their votes have on schools back home. Congress pays attention to the voice of superintendents. Superintendents can really raise the profile of these issues — and it's even better to have a unified voice from a number of different superintendents and constituency groups.”

## **Advocacy: Champions for children**

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The superintendent's role in advocating for high-quality public schools and the resources to ensure teachers and principals are effective has never been more pronounced than in today's volatile political environment. AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech referred to today's superintendent as champions for children and public education. “The superintendent is the voice for all the children in the community, including the many children that would have no voice if not for the superintendent,” Domenech said. “Today, more than ever, superintendents have the awesome responsibility to protect

public education from private and political interests that regard our schools as investment opportunities for corporate gains rather than for fostering the American tradition of an educated community that is the core of our democratic process.”

**“The superintendent is the voice for all the children in the community, including the many children that would have no voice if not for the superintendent.”**

*—Dan Domenech, Executive Director, AASA*

Domenech also pushed back on critics who say public schools are failing, referring to the 95/5 dilemma. The 5 percent of schools that the U.S. Department of Education wants identified as low performing are defining the focus of the remaining 95 percent of schools that are doing better than ever. The former superintendent cites these data to support his case:

- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in fourth- and eighth-grade math and reading have never been higher than they are today.
- The high school dropout rate has been declining since 1972 and is the lowest it has ever been.
- The high school graduation rate of 78 percent is the highest it has been in decades.

Domenech emphasized that there’s still much work ahead to close the achievement gap. While progress has been made narrowing the racial achievement gap, the economic achievement gap has grown wider. The NAEP data are concerning:

- Students on free and reduced-priced lunch in schools where they are 75 percent or more of the student population have the lowest achievement scores.
- Students with the highest achievement scores attend schools where 10 percent or fewer of the learners are on free and reduced-price lunch.
- By the third grade, less than 19 percent of low-income students are at or above the national average in math, reading and science.

What’s more, the lowest-performing high schools have the largest number of students living in poverty. “Many low-income students fail to complete high school,” he said. African-American, Native American and Hispanic students are affected the most by dropout rates. In high school, low-income students have the highest dropout rates and the lowest graduation rates. Only 29 percent of low-income students will pursue college, and only 9 percent of low-income students will complete college.

Poverty is the single greatest factor limiting student achievement today. “Poverty is not an excuse; it’s a reality,” Domenech said. “The unflattering reports of our students’ performance on international tests neglect to mention that the United States has the highest rate of child poverty among peer countries.” Finland, for example, has a child poverty rate of 5 percent compared to America’s 23 percent, he noted.

Poverty’s impact can be regulated if schools have the resources they need to make a difference, including offering early childhood education. Recent studies of investments in early childhood education have shown significant success in preparing all children for school and underscores how important learning is in the early years of a child’s development.

Unfortunately, Domenech said, the way public schools are funded is stacked against the poor. Wealthier communities can raise more dollars through property taxes and other means. “Our federal government was supposed to level the playing field through formula grants that would deliver federal dollars to impoverished communities. But of late, they have taken to diverting those funds into competitive grants that drive their education agenda.” Domenech encouraged superintendents to “tell it like it is” and advocate for all children.



**“The unflattering reports of our students’ performance on international tests neglect to mention that the United States has the highest rate of child poverty among peer countries.”**

*-Dan Domenech, Executive Director, AASA*

## Advocating for your school

As superintendent, you are a constant advocate for your district, students and employees. Advocacy can be a simple conversation with a colleague across town or a more formal meeting with an elected official. Here are some key points to keep in mind:

- ***It's a marathon, not a sprint.*** Reauthorizing federal education statutes doesn't happen overnight; the ideas and policies that underpin these laws are developed over months of conversations and discussions with stakeholders. Whether you're talking to staff about funding, ESEA reauthorization and the waivers, IDEA, Perkins CTE or education technology, it's important to weigh in early and often to maximize your impact.
- ***Relationships, not just substance.*** The partisan environment on Capitol Hill means that having the most logical arguments isn't always enough. Building a personal relationship will ensure your message is noticed and respected. Find out where the staff you meet with grew up or went to school. Try to find commonalities in your life experiences. Say thank you if the staffer is supportive of your priorities and wants to find ways of addressing your concerns.
- ***Systems, not just meetings and letters.*** As educators, we must constantly try to educate elected officials and their staffs. Many staffers have little education experience other than their own schooling. Stay in touch with the staffer once you return home and invite him or her to visit your schools. If you can get that staffer to rely on you as a source of information about key education issues, you can have a real impact on policy.
- ***Information, not just lobbying.*** Before you meet with a staffer or member of Congress, identify your main message and your legislator's position on the issue. Keep your message brief — no more than three key points. Make policy come to life by talking about how current statutes, regulations or funding levels will affect your school system in terms of actual programs and services for children. Give as many real-life examples as possible to emphasize your talking points. Offer to be a resource to staff when they have an important question about a bill or policy.

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- **Put your district's best foot forward.** Capitol Hill staff like to focus on system deficits and see public education as full of problems that need fixing. As your district's ambassador, make sure you emphasize your students' successes by describing initiatives you're proud of leading and highlighting the great work students, teachers, staff and community members are doing in your district.
  - **Anecdotes matter.** In this Congress in particular, members put high value on having an anecdote to draw upon. In the instance of federal education policy, this means being able to point to a particular school, academic program or educational opportunity. If there is going to be an anecdote from your state or Congressional district, why not have it be your school district? By regularly communicating with your congressional delegation and sharing how federal policy is helping or hindering the work of your district, you become a reliable contact and resource for information.

# Conclusion

**T**he 2013 superintendents of the year attending AASA's forum underscored their commitment to advocating for effective teachers, strong school leadership and the resources required to ensure success for every student. Together, they are committed to serving as sense-makers in their communities — a role increasingly critical as promising education reforms grow progressively more complex in today's highly politicized environment. Their voices will help ensure parents, community members and other stakeholders across the country are well-informed about school improvement efforts and the differences they will make for students.

# 2013 STATE SUPERINTENDENTS OF THE YEAR

Congratulations to the following leaders who were selected as the 2013 state superintendents of the year.

Alabama	Jeff Langham	Elmore County School District
Alaska	Steve Atwater	Kenai Peninsula Boro School District
Arizona	Jeff Smith	Balsz Elementary School District 31
Arkansas	Greg Murry	Conway School District
California	Gary Rutherford	Desert Sands Unif School District
Colorado	Sandra Smyser	Poudre School District R-1
Connecticut	Gary G. Richards	Wilton Public School District
Delaware	Kevin R. Fitzgerald	Caesar Rodney High School
Florida	Richard Shirley	Sumter County Schools
Georgia	Chris B. Erwin	Banks County School District
Idaho	Wiley Dobbs	Twin Falls School District 411
Illinois	Jane L. Westerhold	Community Consolidated School District 62
Indiana	Craig J. Hintz	Warsaw Community Schools
Iowa	Tom Lane	Carlisle Community School District
Kansas	Marlin Berry	Olathe Unified School District 233
Kentucky	Randy Poe	Boone County Schools
Louisiana	Michael W. Faulk	Central Community School District
Maine	Betsy M. Webb	Bangor School Department
Maryland	Jack Smith	Calvert County Public School District
Massachusetts	Paul Dakin	Revere City School District
Michigan	Wanda Cook-Robinson	Southfield Public School District
Minnesota	Jeff Olson	St Peter Independent School District 508
Mississippi	David Daigneault	Grenada School District
Missouri	C. J. Huff	Joplin School District R8

Montana	Jason Butcher	Lewistown School District 1
Nebraska	Kevin Riley	Gretna Public School District
Nevada	Caroline McIntosh	Nevada Virtual Academy
New Hampshire	Christine Rath	School Administrative Unit 8 (Concord)
New Jersey	Christopher Manno	Burlington Twp School District
New Mexico	David Atencio	Jemez Valley Public School District
New York	L. Oliver Robinson	Shenendehowa Central School District
North Carolina	Mark A. Edwards	Mooreville Graded School District
North Dakota	David J. Flowers	West Fargo School District 6
Ohio	Rusty Clifford	West Carrollton City School District
Oklahoma	Keith E. Ballard	Tulsa Public Schools
Oregon	Maryalice Russell	McMinnville School District 40
Pennsylvania	William N. Miller	Tyrone Area School District
Rhode Island	Frank Pallotta	Burrillville School District
South Carolina	Rainey Knight	Darlington County School District
South Dakota	Robert Sittig	Baltic High School District
Tennessee	Johnny McDaniel	Bradley County School District
Texas	Daniel King	Pharr San Juan Alamo Independent School District
Utah	Dale Lamborn	Rich County School District
Vermont	Ron Stahley	Windham Southeast School District 48
Virginia	James G. Merrill	Wake County School District
Washington	Saundra L. Hill	Pasco School District
West Virginia	Blaine Hess	Jackson County School District
Wisconsin	JoAnn Sternke	Pewaukee School District
Wyoming	Dan Coe	Big Horn County School District 2

For more information about the AASA National Superintendent of the Year program, please contact Director of Awards and Scholarships, Paula Dearden at [pdearden@aasa.org](mailto:pdearden@aasa.org) or (703) 875-0717.





1615 Duke Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
*[www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org)*